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| Key Competencies for a Missional Congregation

By Tom Berlin On September 28, 2011

Leading Ideas

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The “missional DNA” of Floris United Methodist Church has been one of the keys to our growth and vitality. Fruitfulness in mission has had a dramatic impact on everything from worship attendance to stewardship. I am convinced that vigorous mission engagement is one of the key synergies that drives vitality in congregations of all sizes. What steps can a congregation take to be a “missional church?”

“ Doing “just anything” does not always amount to “doing good.” To give credibility to their mission efforts, congregations must first identify strategic issues.

Prepare spiritually. A passion for mission is the fruit of spiritual conversion. Only transformed people can transform the world. So a congregation’s missional imagination must be holistically grounded in, and meaningfully connected to, its theological self-understanding and worship life. Pastors and key leaders must have their hearts broken for the needs of the poor so that they will engage in ministries of mercy and justice. Disciplines that assist in this preparation include searching scripture, praying, maintaining silence, connecting with the missional history of your church or denomination, and driving through the community and asking, “What does God want us to notice?”

Assess needs. Doing “just anything” does not always amount to “doing good.” To give credibility to their mission efforts, congregations must first identify strategic issues. Church leaders must discern where needs and missional opportunities lie, using census data, community profiles, formal studies by governmental agencies and non-profits, and “the word on the street.” Floris formed a strategic partnership with Hutchinson Elementary School after someone from the Department of Social Services showed us a map displaying statistics on income, crime levels, ethnicity, and

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languages. She pointed to the school and said, “If you really want to do something that will bless children in your community, go here and see what they need.” The school had the highest free and reduced lunch population of any in our immediate region. But sadly, until she pointed out Hutchinson on the map, I did not even know the school existed, although it is only about two miles from our church.

Plan strategically. Mission takes a lot of planning, no matter the size of your church. Once the objective is defined, the church has to consider many factors in order to be fruitful: everything from volunteer enrollment, space and materials, funding, ongoing management, training of volunteers, recruitment and replacement of volunteers. For this planning to be strategic, the church must also define the indicators of success and consider what the life-span of the ministry will be.

Cast a compelling vision. The mission horizon of many churches is defined by a collection of pet projects, each backed by a small constituency. A larger view is possible only when lay and clergy leaders can articulate a shared, scripturally informed understanding of what the church is called to do. There is no limit to what a group of people can do when they are captured by a vision of what the church, led by the Holy Spirit, can accomplish. Floris started a children’s home and hospital in Sierra Leone, Africa, after a pastor from that country in 1999 cast the first vision of blessing children impacted by the war. The energy that sustains these ministries is created when the vision is recast year after year.

Create partnerships. Floris rarely creates its own programs in the community. We prefer to work with other organizations that have structures already in place to which we can add human and financial resources. Established denominational churches often have a unique opportunity because they are seen as trusted partners within the religious community. For example, Floris Church recently helped launch Connections for Hope, a center that houses six area non-profits under a single roof. This was possible because each trusted us — in part because of our one-hundred-year history of service to the community.

Communicate. Once the vision is clear, it must be communicated in such a way that the majority of church members want to participate. It is not enough to write it. You must say it, over and over again, through multiple communication channels and as a part of worship services. When members travel to Sierra Leone, for example, the vision is cast through pictures, blogs and even by Skyping the children into a worship service. The more the ministry develops, the easier it is to tell the story. However, as time goes by, it is more necessary to refresh the vision regularly as yesterday’s exciting project becomes today’s same old thing. Frequent communication serves to remind the church of its missional DNA.

Secure funding. Money is a key determinant of the scope and impact of mission. The simple truth is that when money is in place, you can do things. When it is not present, you can’t. So churches must address the issue of mission funding head on. We must invite people and businesses in our community to join us in supporting good work so that unsustainable burdens are not placed on the church budget. I have become more confident and forthright in addressing the relationship between money and mission. And as a result, more church members participate in transformative ministry that blesses many, many others. They are also willing to invite their friends who may not attend any church to join them in supporting the good work our church is doing in the community and world.

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About Author

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